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*Place Branding*

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## **'All for One, One for All': communicative processes of co- creation of place brands through inclusive and horizontal stakeholder collaborative networks**

### **Abstract**

This paper examines stakeholder communication and interaction dynamics in place branding processes in order to inform alternative participatory place branding models. The paper draws from critical communications and branding theory to argue that place brand identities are the result of mediated messages in the public sphere. Consequently, place branding processes need to be observed as communicative exchanges. Through a case study of Australia's southern and only island state of Tasmania, the research employs participatory action research combined with the method of sociological intervention to explore stakeholders' communicative interaction patterns and engagement in place branding processes. Participants representing formal and informal stakeholders engaged in communicating meaning about places were invited to participate in a series of interviews and focus group discussions that allowed a unique self-reflective process and analysis of practices and power-geometries. The proposed quasi-real scenario led to an understanding of the impediments for communication and to scoping alternative modes of engagement towards effective stakeholder communication to support the development of resilient place brand identities. The findings of the exploration contribute to theoretical development of the field by providing an analysis of the nature of stakeholder interactions and communication patterns, impediments and

opportunities for greater communication and collaboration towards a common purpose. On a practical level, the study can also inform the development of participatory models of place brand development. Finally, the method proposed here can serve as a practical tool to foster stakeholder engagement in processes of co-creation of place brand identities.

### **Keywords**

**Place branding, communication, co-creation, networks, participatory action research.**

## 1. Introduction

Typically, place branding has followed a hierarchical and unidirectional top-down model of strategic communication aimed at increasing the competitive advantage of places through the development of positive place images that get communicated to foreign publics (Braun, Kavaratzis & Zenker, 2013). With the advent of new Information and Communication Technologies (ICT), this model is now challenged by emerging patterns of communication through social networks. Contrary to formal strategic branding models, “network society” communication about places is more fluid, horizontal and multidirectional (Castells, 2011), often leading to contestation and counter-narratives, as well as a multiplicity of brand messages resulting in diffuse place images (Warnaby & Medway, 2013).

Place branding has been described as “inherently political because it always includes a struggle between a brand and its homogenous, silencing effects, and the overflowing, polyphonic reality of people’s interpretations of a place” (Clegg & Kornburger, 2010, p. 8). Therefore, place brands are now conceptualized as multidimensional (Hankinson, 2004), with research on place branding focusing on interweaving strategic place brand communication and processes of place identity formation (Kavaratzis & Hatch, 2013, p. 71).

Places are conceived as “boundary objects,” place brands are socially and politically constructed through exchanges of communication about place, and place branding “introduces the potential by inserting the brand’s own dimensions into the representational space between where a place is and where it might be” (Lury, 2011, p. 52). Place brands are also conceived as both “mediatic spaces” (Arvidsson, 2005, p. 238), “new media objects” supporting multichannel communication flow and “platforms for action” (Lury, 2004, p. 1), affecting consumption and identity formation in postmodern societies (Appadurai, 1996). Hence, the multi-layered, dynamic, social and political context in which place reputations are mediated (Van Ham, 2008) has challenged formal strategic brand communication with the aim to effect positive place identities (Kavaratzis & Hatch, 2013). In the public domain, place messages are fluid and constantly re-interpreted (Castells, 2007). In light of this reality, short-term rigid approaches to communicating meaning about place through the development of a static set of attributes need to give way to constant, flexible and resilient models of mediation of meaning about places (Kavaratzis, 2017).

As a consequence, place branding scholars have turned their attention to the co-creative process of creation of meaning about places marked by non-linear communication exchanges by a range of traditional and non-traditional stakeholders, including civil society (Kavaratzis 2012). In this context, place branding serves as a tool for social and political communication and organization, a process in which the “agents, relationships and interactions” between different spheres of relationships need to be observed (Hanna & Rowley, 2011, p. 473; Hankinson, 2004). The reconceptualization of branding for complex entities such as places has required the contribution to the debate of other disciplines, such as communications and cultural studies, as well as governance (Kavaratzis & Hatch, 2013; Lucarelli & Berg, 2011). To further this endeavour, this paper explores the link between the structures and patterns of strategic communication of meaning about places and the process of place identity formation that occurs in the network society to inform the development of participatory, inclusive and co-creative models of place branding that better reflect the processes of mediation of meaning about places in the public domain. Reviewing the patterns of communication is important for the development of more inclusive participatory place branding models insofar as they form the basis of the dialogue underlying the place brand formation process. By revealing the structural constraints to communication in place branding processes, as well as scoping potential solutions, alternative arrangements can be formulated.

The paper is structured as follows. We first present a review of the literature on place branding focused on place identities as assemblages of meaning by different actors, the

process of negotiation of such meanings and the need for more participatory arrangements to enable co-creative and collaborative place branding processes. This is followed by a description of the methodology employed. We then present and discuss our results, concluding with the implications of the research for both theory and practice.

## **2. From strategic communication to place branding *multilogue***

In this section we offer a review of concept, highlighting the implications of observing place brands as identities, highlighting the communicative process of co-creation aimed at “the crafting of the brand identity, as well as its transmission” (Sevin, 2011, p. 159).

### **2.1. *Place brand identity***

The conceptualization of place brands has been hindered by the lack of clarity between key concepts such as place identity, place image, place perception and place reputation (Govers & Go, 2016). In the field of corporate communications, TC Melewar argues that image is “the net result of the interaction of all experiences, beliefs, feelings, knowledge, and impressions that each stakeholder has about an organisation” whereas “corporate identity resides in the organisation” (2003, p. 214). According to this conceptualization, place images respond to the commodification of certain characteristics of places and to the potential impression in the minds of others and are separated from brand identity (Van Ham, 2008). Place brands, however, show added complexity since places are centers of both production and consumption (Short, Benton, Luce & Walton, 1993) that are “diffuse, complex and vaguely defined” (Roberts, 2012, p. 206). Place brands are the result of a “continual process of iteration” (Aitken & Campelo, 2011, p. 915), shared realities created from social interactions that form brand ecosystems (Bergvall, 2006). The “brand perceptions” born through such exchanges form the sets of symbolic meanings that shape place brands, defined as “network of associations in the consumers’ mind based on the visual, verbal and behavioural expression of a place, which is embodied through the aims, communication, values and the general culture of the place’s stakeholders and the overall place design” (Braun & Zenker, 2010, p. 5). Insofar as they are social conceptions with attached political, cultural, social and economic value, we understand place brands as holistic representations of place that are negotiated through communication exchanges.

Simon Anholt defined place brand image as “the perception of the brand that exists in the mind of the consumers or audience” (2007, p. 5), thus emphasizing place branding as an exercise of communication with foreign publics to *change* or positively affect place reputations, parallel to public diplomacy endeavors. The realization that consumers’ experiences also have an effect on place brand meanings (Warnaby, 2009) has led to the conceptualization of place brands as network of associations emerging from the interactions and negotiation of meaning about place by both external and internal audiences (Go & Govers, 2010; Zenker & Beckmann, 2013). Brand identity would be based on the place’s vision and culture, a sum of symbols made of tangible and intangible place assets (Aaker, 1997), whereas brand image would refer only to the interpretation of such brand identity (Kapferer, 2012). The competitive advantage of place brands, we argue, resides rather in a common identity based on a shared purpose for the place’s advancement determined through engagement with a range of stakeholders. In the sections to follow we examine the co-creative process of formation of place identities through communication exchanges.

### **2.2. *Negotiating meaning about place***

Recent conceptualizations of place branding that take into consideration the need for greater stakeholder engagement have observed the complexities associated with the development of more participatory processes. Public diplomacy practitioners, for instance, have embraced place branding as an alternative to old-fashion propaganda (Cull, 2009; Szondi, 2008) to

engage with non-traditional stakeholders in nation-building, insofar as place branding can act as a tool to “communicate and cultivate on behalf of a nation-state a desired image and reputation, and to build common ground and understanding among nations and people” (Wang, 2005, p. 32). Since then, however, the changes in ICT have affected deeply the conduct of what has been labelled as New Public Diplomacy (Nye, 2008), and a new form of “dialogical communication” has emerged as a result (Wang, 2005, p. 34). The role of public diplomacy has shifted to building common understanding through communicative interactions, otherwise known as people-to-people diplomacy (Snow, 2014). Place branding, however, encompasses communication to both foreign and domestic audiences (Anholt, 2007; Cull, 2009) and therefore the terms of stakeholder engagement need to be redefined, since place brand associations are mediated by institutions and affected by power relations (Kavaratzis & Kalandides, 2015). We understand these power relations as the “dialectics of control” of the branding message (Carpentier, 2011, p. 141). In a Foucauldian sense, the “discursive power” inherent in the strategies of place brand managers defines how the process is defined and managed, typically following a rationale of enhancing competitive advantage (Carpentier, 2011, p. 141). This approach to power is inevitably linked to Bourdieu’s (1991) claim that legitimacy and agency are the key elements for maintaining or subverting such power. Safeguarding political interests through gatekeeping or other control mechanisms (Mayes, 2008) has been disrupted by ICT developments and the emergence of non-linear and multimodal communication channels.

With the advent of online communications and media, formal place brands are challenged by alternative and often contested understandings of the territorial entities they are set to represent in the digital arena (Graham, Zook & Boulton, 2013). While governments, typically through public agencies and with the assistance of consultants, develop place brands based on positive place attributes to increase visitation, attract investment or talent, and boost exports (Morgan & Pritchard, 2002), organic and constant informal communication about places is projected, often in dialogue or conflict with the former (Baker, 2007; Houghton & Stevens, 2011; Kavaratzis & Ashworth, 2015). Furthermore, the development of formal branding communication emphasizing certain aspects of place risks commodifying other features of place (Jansen, 2008) and increases the subjectivity to failure in the event of a crisis (Avraham, 2009; Mayes, 2008; Kaneva, 2011).

In light of the many difficulties governments and public agencies envisage to maintain control of messages about place in such relational models, they often resort to marketing and branding experts to develop and manage place identities. Such identities are based on a series of positive assets that then get communicated to enhance a positive reputation. Place brands, however, combine representational and functional elements of places (Caldwell & Freire, 2004) in the form of images in the minds of consumers and are constantly reinterpreted through exchanges of meaning in relational processes (Hankinson, 2015). Furthermore, the communicated elements can have both intentional and non-intentional communicative effects (Giovanardi, 2012, p. 39–40).

Place brands are the sum of meaning produced by internal and external audiences. Furthermore, place brand identities result from the interplay between private, public and civil society’s interests (Therkelsen, Haider & Jensen, 2010). The negotiation of place brand meaning now happens in the social network and is heavily influenced by user-generated content often counteracting official content by public agencies. Communicating place brands as complex multidimensional entities requires a two-way process in which stakeholder engagement is key, since positive reputations are built on “common understanding” and relationships (Wang, 2005, p. 41). In the place branding process, different voices affecting the development of place brands (Baker, 2007) engage in a *multilogue* (Aitken & Campelo, 2011) of different perspectives and ideas that are debated in the public domain (Houghton & Stevens, 2011).

The realization of the multi-stakeholder nature of place brand communication led to the development of various relational models (Hankinson, 2004), based on the combination of representational and functional attributes of place brands (Giovanardi, 2012). In this sense, places could be rather observed as sets of narratives (Chronis, Arnould & Hampton, 2012; Lichrou, O'Malley & Patterson, 2010), part of a consumer culture in which consumers produce meaning whilst identifying lifestyle goals through brands (Arnould & Thompson, 2005, p. 871), that is amplified and echoed by the accounts of place in the media (Ketter & Avraham, 2012).

In light of such developments, we understand place as a multi-layered and multipurpose keyword (Harvey & Braun, 1996), a concept comprising a unique blend of identities (Massey, 2007). Insofar as such complexity is the result of the interactions and communication between actors, we argue that there is a need to develop structures that allow greater participation in the development of place brand identities. In this sense critical studies in communication and culture can be useful when observing the organic formation process of place brands.

### ***2.3. Place branding multilogue: co-creating place brands***

As noted above, place brands are co-created and mediated through exchanges of meaning. Moreover, the communication of place brands is affected by the social context, structures and relations in which the exchanges of meaning occur, since places are complex entities and their identities are both imagined and affected constantly by negotiated exchanges of meaning by stakeholders in social settings (Aitken & Campelo, 2011). Place brand communication is also subject to representations by consumers (in the public sphere), and media producers (Kavaratzis, 2004; Lester, 2010). In this process, consumers of formally projected place brands also become producers of symbolic meaning which in turn affects the place brand (Lury, 2011; Van Dijck, 2009). This has challenged the linear communication of symbolic meaning about place in traditional place branding models and has led to the conceptualization of place brands as networks of associations (Hildreth, 2011) and to an emphasis on the management of perceptions or reputations (Zenker & Martin, 2011).

Place brands transcend their role as a promotional tool (Gnoth, 2007) since they contribute to the collective creation of sense of place (Kalandides, 2011) in a postmodern setting characterised by "a space of flows" where the social and the territorial are reconfigured in the social network (Castells, 2011). Inevitably, public place branding messages are nowadays confronted by information disseminated in the public sphere (Lester, 2010, 2014; McGaurr, Tranter & Lester, 2015), with citizens taking a more active role in creating and distributing messages in "circular and interactive models" (Ketter & Avraham, 2012, p. 286) in which brand meaning is constantly interacting "in complementary or conflicting manners" (Kavaratzis & Kalandides, 2015, p. 1371; Zenker & Beckmann, 2013). Observing the "crafting of the brand identity, as well as its transmission" (Sevin, 2011, p. 159) in social networks supports an understanding of place as process that is "absolutely not static" (Massey, 1994, p. 147). The transformative nature of consumption of meaning about place is linked to a "consumer culture [...] a culture of exchange, mobility and circulation, of transnational movement and transformation of ideas, people and things" (Lury, 2011, p.192). We can therefore conceptualise place brands as integrative elements created by both cultures and people (Aitken & Campelo, 2011); visible forces that perform expressive or transformative roles in their mediation of meanings (Lury, 2011, p. 138).

As "multi-leveled" ontologies (Lury, 2009, p. 67), place brands can also be understood as processes of assembling culture, continuously affected by cross-cultural and historical perspectives creating alternative brand perceptions (Kapferer, 2012). Hence, some scholars argue that the process of place branding must be an "internally-focused, collective exercise" (Kaneva & Popescu, 2011; Kavaratzis & Ashworth, 2015, p. 169-170). A cultural approach to place brand processes, moreover, claims that top-down strategic communication processes or the marketization of places – consisting of "selective storytelling or attempts to re-imagine

the city” to emphasize a set of attractive attributes about place (Jensen, 2007, p. 212–213; Jeong & Santos, 2004) –risk resulting in the “commodification” of cultural aspects of place (Evans, 2003; Kavaratzis & Ashworth, 2015; Ooi, 2004; Varga, 2013).

If places are characterized by the symbolic interaction between discourses that characterize the place (Lury, 2009), observing stakeholder relationships and communication dynamics underlying place brands is therefore key. We observe place branding not only as a form of formal strategic communication, but as a process of “dialogue and collaboration” between actors with an interest in the place (Bianchini & Ghilardi, 2007, p. 283).

#### **2.4. Place brands, decision-making and power**

The advent of digital communications and the increasing role and effects of user-generated content on place reputation (Munro, 2011) present many challenges to democracy, transparency and accountability of the place brand process (De San Eugenio Vela, 2013; Varga, 2013). The realization that information flows add to social capital and can build community from constant dialogue (Lee, Árnason, Nightingale & Schucksmith, 2005; Pasquinelli, 2015) is at the base of a new focus on the marketing concept of co-creation. This concept is linked to the service-dominant logic of marketing highlighting also intangible brand elements, such as links and exchanges (Warnaby, 2009) that are determined by stakeholders (Houghton & Stevens, 2011). New place branding models need to better reflect the co-creative nature of place brand meaning (Kavaratzis & Hatch, 2013).

The distillation of a brand essence through branding and communication techniques aimed at promoting a certain set of values (De Chernatony, 2008) is affected by a domination of decision-making by government and businesses, often neglecting residents and other stakeholders (Aitken & Campelo, 2011). In this research, we understand stakeholders as “any group or individual who can affect or is affected by the achievement of the organization’s objectives” (Freeman, 1984, p. 46), that act as *nodes* or members of the social system in which place branding occurs. We aim to observe the *ties* or interrelationships that provide the interconnections where meaning about places is mediated (Castells, 2008), including the absence of such relationships, conflict and particular interests (Houghton & Stevens, 2011; Olsson & Berglund, 2009).

The above sections argue that place brands are complex social and political constructs (Aronczyk, 2008) whose true essence lies in the relational exchanges between place brand managers, place brand consumers and place residents. This translates to increased importance of stakeholder engagement for the success of place brand management despite the inherent challenges around mediation of conflicted interests. Despite recognition for the need to engage with other stakeholders in place branding processes, governments and their public agencies have proven to be reluctant to give up brand and message control (Zavattaro, 2014).

In the social or public sphere, places are understood as bounded political communities, whose “normative legitimacy and political efficacy of communicative power” are questioned in a globalized arena (Fraser, 2007, p. 8; Lucarelli & Giovanardi, 2016). In practice, different meanings respond to varying interests in place (Ooi, 2004). In this sense, we observe power-geometries place-identity formation processes, in which place values are created and shared in relational “networks of networks” (Taylor & Kent, 2014, p. 103).

Scholarly research has highlighted that stakeholder engagement, despite contestation, ultimately supports the creation of public value contributing to increased efficiency and coherence in the brand message (Hankinson, 2015), and that reducing place identities to serve particular interests fails to achieve “authenticity, recognition, acceptance and commitment by the local community” (Aitken & Campelo, 2011, p. 918). Since “sense of place” in the public domain is created through social integration (Massey, 1994), legitimacy is linked to increased

stakeholder dialogue and the empowerment of non-traditional stakeholders through the development of mutual trust (Ind & Bjerke, 2007; Therkelsen, Halkier & Jensen, 2010).

Place branding processes, we have found, require collective reflection on the reasons, aims and objectives underlying the development of place brand identities. Place brands must be understood as complex assemblages of meanings produced, communicated and reinterpreted by different stakeholders. In reviewing the dynamic and relational nature of place brands linked to co-creative processes of construction of meaning about place, we have observed the construction of collective place identity and its “organizations of power, knowledge and exchange” (Aronczyk, 2008, p. 46). We have highlighted the horizontality and dynamism of exchanges of meaning about places and the need for alternative arrangements to support stakeholder communication and engagement that better reflect participation in communicative processes. We argue that, in light of the challenges that new forms of horizontal and non-linear communications exchanges have brought to the task of branding places, it is key to observe communication dynamics between stakeholders to inform the development of models that better reflect the negotiation of meaning about place for branding processes and more interactive platforms for engagement. Thus, we set out to investigate stakeholder interactions and patterns of communication in an applied setting as described in our research design.

### **3. Methodology**

We situate this research within the broader topics of stakeholder engagement and participatory place branding. Following a call for more integrated methodologies in place branding (Chan & Marafa, 2013), we employed a case study methodology (Lucarelli & Brorström, 2013; Yin, 2003) that combined Participatory Action Research (PAR) and the method of Sociological Intervention (SI) to deploy a practical rationale to assist social change in place branding. The methodology is explained in more detail in the paragraphs to follow.

Action research is useful to investigate alternative models and their effects through participants' analysis and reflections in practice (Hesse-Biber & Leacy, 2011, p. 50). Participants' insights and responses to alternative arrangements provide useful insights to the development of such alternative arrangements. In addition to building or testing theory, PAR often focuses on enacting social change by providing collaborative solutions to ‘wicked problems’ and is useful to observe “turbulent environments” by providing access to the reality underlying them (Perry & Gummesson, 2004, p. 318). Furthermore, the method of SI was developed to observe the identity formation dynamics of social movements (Touraine, 1981, 2000) and is applied to the Tasmanian case in combination with PAR to provide an innovative “group-based research” avenue for the exploration of stakeholder interactions and the process of developing and communicating place brand identities. The method of SI is situated in the critical tradition of action research and is focused on observing social movements as ‘conflict between actors over the social management of cultural issues which is never completely reducible to the self-interest of one party or the other’ (Touraine, 2000, p. 113). The SI method consists of four main stages: a “witness group” where participants share their approaches to place branding and create collective identities; a “confrontation group” where participants self-analyze their historical account of their experiences in place branding processes; a “flexion” group focusing on the development of a common vision supported by action; and a “conversion” stage representing a long-lasting relationship between action and analysis (co-creation). The researcher, despite being inserted in the communities under study, has a different role to that of the ethnographer, since it does not aim to provide participants' observations in applied research (Herr & Anderson, 2005), but rather as facilitator of collective debate (Dubet & Wiewiorka, 1996, p. 59). The research design adapted the SI method to the context of this study and used a before-and-after combination of interviews and focus group discussions (Barbour, 2007; Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011, p. 35) as outlined in Table 1:

**Table 1:** Fieldwork main stages (adapted from Ripoll Gonzalez 2018, p. 118).

Date	Method	Time	Sample	Location	Description
August 2014 – January 201	In-depth interviews	45-90 min.	N=17	Launceston, Hobart and online.	Participants were asked a series of questions about their experiences and involvement in putting Tasmania ‘on the map’.
20/11/15	Focus Group 1– State of the art	120 min.	N=5	Launceston	Participants were asked to share their experiences in a group setup, reflecting on the different approaches and issues encountered. Author 1 facilitated a discussion on the different approaches taken by the participants to putting Tasmania on the map.  Participants discussed particular actions, interests or contextual factors that influenced or justified the approaches taken.
5/02/16	Focus Group 2– Introducing the participant-governed model	120 min.	N=4	Launceston	Author 1 pre-distributed a two-page document outlining a ‘participant-governed network model’ for putting Tasmania on the map to be discussed during the intervention.
1/05/16	Focus Group 2– Introducing the participant-governed model	120 min.	N=3	Hobart	Author 1 pre-distributed a two-page document outlining a ‘participant-governed network model’ for putting Tasmania on the map to be discussed during the intervention.
1-3/05/16	Post FG in-depth interviews – reflections on the model	45-60 min.	N=3	Hobart	Participants that were not able to attend the focus group intervention agreed to be interviewed to gather their thoughts on the model.
16/06/16	Focus Group 3– Tasmanian Leaders Program <sup>1</sup>	120 min.	N=8	Launceston	An extra cohort of 8 participants was recruited for an additional intervention.

<sup>1</sup> We initially obtained participants utilizing a snowballed purposive sampling approach. However, for the last focus group discussion and for comparative purposes, we accessed a wide database of alumni of the Tasmanian Leaders Program (TPL). A group of engaged leaders and critical thinkers with cross-industry skills and background relevant to the project. More information on the Tasmanian Leaders Program can be found at [www.tasmanianleaders.org](http://www.tasmanianleaders.org).



The combination between PAR and the SI method is relevant since it provides an innovative approach to studying identity formation in place branding processes. Furthermore, the qualitative design presented here is particularly suited to study complex processes like place branding since it goes beyond content analysis to explore social interactions by inviting participants to collectively self-reflect on their communicative interactions (or lack of) (Babbie, 2013; Habermas, 1971). The aim was to observe interactions and, to some extent, to empower participants to realize the potential of participatory approaches and increased collaboration (Chevalier & Buckles, 2013). The methodology acted as a 'tool for the education and development of consciousness as well as mobilization of action' (Gaventa, 1991, p. 121-122). The study follows a practical rationale to assist social change in place branding by observing stakeholders' power struggles (Dubet & Wieviorka, 1996; Munday, 2006, p. 94) and responds to academic calls by informing theory and improving practice through action (Herr & Anderson, 2005).

A participatory and intervention methodology is then applied through a case study of Tasmania, the southern island state in the Commonwealth of Australia. The case is of interest since it presents a complex example of interactions and conflict between formal and informal place branding messages and provides good ground to study the potential for change. Tasmania's brand is, at best, the sum of strong formal country-of-origin government-led branding, highlighting high-quality produce grown in a clean and green environment by the state's agribusinesses. Such branding attempts and strategies are challenged by private brands and civil society, emphasizing environmental concerns over exploitation of World Heritage Areas and alternative cultural and tourism development and experiences. Consequently, Tasmania's reputation is driven by the interactions and contestation between public, private and civil society actors, which often results in uncoordinated and counter-effective branding efforts.

The objective of applying an intervention methodology is to study stakeholder interactions and the communication patterns that characterize the dynamic process of place identity formation and responds to the following research questions:

R1: What are the interaction and communication dynamics between stakeholders in the process of branding places?

R2: How and to what extent do stakeholders communicate with others in place branding processes?

The basic design was flexible and iterative and was further developed and modified during the inquiry (Chevalier & Buckles, 2013; Babbie, 2013). Using a purposive sample approach, we recruited a total of 24 participants representing various stakeholder groups engaged in formally and informally branding Tasmania (Barbour, 2007). Participants' backgrounds were identified following a literature review and included: 'government, business industry, tourism industry, creative arts industry, education industry, non-governmental and not-for-profit organisations, private industry and civil society (residents)' (Dattalo, 2008; García, Gómez & Molina, 2012). The transcripts from the interviews and focus groups were organized using a mix of inductive and deductive coding following specific theoretical interests identified in the literature review and recurrent issues. The data was interpreted through constant comparative analysis of the contextual and cultural factors underlying place branding processes, as well as patterns of interaction (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The results were validated through pragmatic, consensus validation and reflection (Karslen, 1991). Finally, the qualitative analysis explores social interactions by identifying key discourse themes (Babbie, 2013).

#### **4. Findings**

Our main finding is the perceived lack of interaction between stakeholders in place branding processes. Decision-making mainly occurs at the government-business level, consequently

conferring marginal or purely consultative roles to indirect stakeholders, such as residents or civil society in the implementation of branding strategies (Klijn, Eshis & Braun, 2012). The main impediments to engagement expressed through the interviews are outlined in Table 2:

**Table 2:** Outline of Findings of the In-Depth Interviews by Emerging Themes (authors' own)

THEMES	ISSUES	EXAMPLES
Different motivations to brand the state	COO/Tourism/Umbrella branding/Citizen branding Media accounts	<i>A lot of strategies are done behind closed doors. They are written and then everyone just lives by it. But to get the buy-in, especially when creating community change, the community has got to own it, and sometimes those organizations actually have to let go of what can happen in that, because the community's asking for something different (participant 1, in-depth interview).</i>
Context to branding	Geographical divide; sense of apathy towards political engagement or change, self-interest for economic survival	<i>Fundamentally Tasmania waits for the government to tell them what to do. Half a million people, three layers of government, the worst bureaucracy of any community in the world [...]. That's why you get artificial things (participant 7, in-depth interview).</i>
Culture of branding	Lack of culture of collaboration. Leadership, power and authority residing mostly in government	<i>It does not necessarily have to be a leader it needs to be a communicator. I think there has to be a shift in the top-down, inside-out model, and just make sure that everybody is sharing what they are doing (participant 14, focus group I).</i>
Structure of the place branding process	Top-down, hierarchical, government-dominated strategic planning Multiplicity of stakeholders, parochialism	<i>It is resources, and it is political cycle. The current government comes in and its mode of operating is: it announces a to-do-list of 100 items and it is only going to do these things (participant 17, focus group III).</i>
Resources	Financial resources are mainly public. Non-financial resources are knowledge-related and social capital (disregarded)	<i>None of the significant activities that happen in this state would happen without some level of subsidy from the government or local government. And the major players know that so there is a real fear of 'I need to get in first'. (participant 24, focus group III).</i>
Approach to branding the state: formal/informal	Different roles and objectives for government, public organizations, media and forms of brand activism (i.e. environmental concern).	<i>Should the media be at the heart of it? They are critical stakeholders in the on-going socialization of it but not at the development of it (participant 15, in-depth interview).</i>  <i>Teach your own people to love your place and they'll be your ambassadors (participant 10, in-depth interview).</i>

Lack of stakeholder engagement	Consultative engagement, residents traditionally paying lip service.	<i>I think sometimes it's information sharing, sometimes it's true engagement where you do actually collect people's input because you want to understand whether you're on the right track or not and give people notice. [...] Sometimes decisions have to be made and people just need to be informed (participant 8, focus group IV).</i>
Expected outcomes	Specific branding campaigns perceived as successful.  However, stakeholders identified a need for an umbrella brand.	<i>I think they [branding organization] were on the right track [...] they've continued campaigning but what they haven't spent a lot of time and energy on is talking into the industry about how they live the brand (participant 7, in-depth interview).</i>

The Tasmanian context revealed that this is in part due to governments' perceived authority as managers of the resources of a given place (Clegg & Kornberger, 2010; Warnaby, 2009), and to the politics behind the branding exercise (Mayes, 2008; Ooi, 2004) as evidenced in the quote below:

The only way to control them [place brand agencies] at all is to have them in government. The closer they are to government, the more they are forced to share. The further they drift out, the more they don't communicate. Especially not so much events but tourism. Its inability to explain the roles of Tourism Tasmania, individual organizations, or Regional Tourism Organizations. [...] You have these two groups Tourism Tasmania and industry, and the industry yelling back about this so-called gap in communication (participant 6, focus group III).

Despite the importance of a strong political vision to maintaining trust (Zenker & Martin, 2010), governments' gatekeeping issues can undermine stakeholder engagement and the distribution of power across the network (Govers & Go, 2016). Governments seemed to be particularly concerned with the disrupting potential of media or citizens' opposition to particular projects that might affect the brand:

We use the media basically. If it is very important that we keep public awareness around the project and where it is at and how it is going (participant 10, in-depth interview).

That industry [forestry] and its impact on our state from an environmental perspective but equally from a perspective of what it would do to the cost of our road infrastructure and the burden it would place on locals and thirdly the impact on our tourism industry, experience and particularly the brand (participant 10, in-depth interview).

This could hinder the process of developing a common project for the place based on long-term strong engagement, information and knowledge exchanges and collaboration towards a mutual purpose (Klijn, Eshuis & Braun, 2012; Pasquinelli, 2015), as evidenced by the quote below:

I think about changing the frame. Thinking and talking about Tasmania is a very long-term process. It's not an immediate thing and it is not just one book, or one intervention, or one invention that does that. It is something that needs to be sustained (participant 20, in-depth interview).

Despite the recognition of the potential benefits of engaging stakeholders through network models of communication and collaboration for place branding, government representatives seemed reluctant to transition into such models due to their associated risks, including awareness of potential public outcry, negative perception of governments' actions

and saturation from end users, among others (Picazo-Vela, Gutiérrez-Martínez, & Luna-Reyes, 2012):

Linked to a number of reports sitting on your filing cabinet that no one ever reads, and they have costed an exorbitant amount of money to produce, so let alone implementation [...] the key is that it is a co-participation model in terms of the development of the work, but most importantly we then take the work, own the work, it is ours, and then implement it in a way (participant 15, in- depth interview).

The discussions led in fact to a realization of the lack of communication from those in charge of strategic communications and the ones that actually engage in realizing the promise or experience associated to the brand:

One of the most evident things from the discussions was a complete lack of perspective with the other partner. We can back the council, and we can back the government, but unless you understand what they have to get done to get you what you want you are going to get frustrated just by not understanding what your partners want or can do (participant 7, focus group I).

This in fact led to a sense of apathy towards the process, and the requirement of increased leadership and communication from non-traditional sectors (other than the public):

[Other stakeholders] are very generous but the kind of generosity they have for each other is based on self-interest, so they are not in the communal space (participant 6, focus group III).

Conflict between stakeholder groups often responded to the different interests and objectives of the brand exercise (Hankinson, 2015, p. 25). The research found that participants were developing their branding strategies in silos and identified several impediments to the operationalization of collaborative models, primarily due to power struggles, existing perceptions and expectations and a rigid institutional framework marked by a government leading role in the development of place brand strategies. However, there was a general recognition of the need to do branding differently and collaboratively:

It's not about believing. We need to do it. We need to be true to ourselves. We love this place and it is special. Having a longer-term vision around what that looks like for prosperity for our future generation is simply absolutely necessarily (participant 15, in-depth interview).

During the interventions, participants had an opportunity to reflect on their practices and engagement dynamics further by engaging in self-inquiry about potential for change. This resulted in an outline of impediments to engagement and collaboration, as well as an acknowledgement of the opportunities that lie within (see Table 3).

**Table 3:** Outline of the Findings from the Sociological Intervention by Emerging Themes (authors' own)

INTERVENTION DATA	THEMES	ASSOCIATED THEMES	EXAMPLES
ISSUES	Multiplicity stakeholder groups	Management	<i>Participant 6: Everyone gets a voice (focus group III).</i>
	Apathy	Disconnect	<i>I think there are a lot of people out there who have learned either that the system doesn't work or that the system doesn't welcome them. And as a result, they have no confidence to actually engage with that system (participant 9, focus group II).</i>
	Lack of legitimacy outside government	Find leadership to support legitimate engagement	<i>If you had to go through and write down who the leaders are in this region half them offer their leadership on a voluntary sense. [...] They have no ownership, no awareness of ownership or vested interest in pursuing anything [...] You've got to gain belief and then ownership, otherwise the whole thing just collapses into another document in a bookcase and we've got plenty of them (participant 7, focus group II).</i>
	Lack of culture of collaboration	Non-conducive environment; self-interest	<i>That's the confidence issue [...] people's history and their relationships with people and trust (participant 2, focus group IV).</i>
	Rigid structure	Lack of clear models to implement in practice, mostly top-down	<i>I think because of the isolated nature of the way in which each of the sectors work in the north, there is not that forum that opportunity that platform, whatever, for people to start working collaboratively (participant 11, focus group II).</i>
	Gatekeeping issues	Resistance to share resources and know how due to competition	<i>It is sort of a motherhood that everyone would like to help everybody else but they want to make sure that they are ok first, and therefore, you know, there was a genuine, let's go along and see about this, but then when it came to the crunch of actually then really collaborating, so people ended up retreating to their own corners a bit (participant 17, focus group III).</i>

OPPORTUNITIES	Alignment of brand message	Sharing information as a practice	<i>Just wondering about like the use of technology and maybe as a technological platform that would allow this system to function (participant 4, focus groups IV).</i>
	Responsive to global trends (resilient)	Move towards collaboration	<i>[T]hey are fighting over the shared space where they actually don't need to (participant 6, focus group III).</i>
	General acknowledgment of the dynamism of place and the need for flexible structures	Capitalize on such dynamism	<i>Because there is a core set of attributes about a place, and sure they are not forever, and you can have a major disruption with them (participant 17, focus group III).</i>
	Employing the opportunity of a threat to start dialogue	Defining a common purpose	<i>There is a crisis, it's just a really slow gradual one (participant 4, focus group IV).</i>
	Revolution	Must be guided by an evolution towards increased changes	<i>There are two ways that stuff can happen: either organically from the bottom up, which I think won't happen here; or it needs a strategic driver for it and leadership at that level, and an example of how that could happen, but isn't happening. (participant 17, focus group III).</i>

Despite an initial in-depth discussion on who the legitimate stakeholders in place branding processes are, participants abandoned their inherent power positions and incurred in discussions, knowledge sharing and most importantly collaboration:

In fact, I think one of our key roles is the collective impact approach [...] I believe the more diverse the collaboration, the better the outcome (participant 18, in-depth interview).

The opportunity for engagement, learning and self-reflection in network settings allow increased trust and exchanges between government and other stakeholders (Zavattaro, 2014). The Tasmanian case showed the need for education around collaboration for the communication of place brand identities, especially in times of crisis or rapid changes, and when face with contestation from the media discourse, such as the case of environmental conflict in Tasmania (Kapucu, 2006; Lester, 2007).

## 5. Conclusion

This study offers a unique perspective into the patterns of interaction and communication underlying place branding processes to inform theory development and the operationalization of co-creative and participatory place branding models. The case presented here provides an in-depth account of the communication dynamics as well as an outline of issues and impediments to collaboration. Beyond this outline, the exploration identified opportunities for further engagement and scoped the potential and suitability of alternative network governance models to support more inclusive place branding processes.

The exploration of the motivations, interests, contested agendas and power dynamics provided recommendations for the development of more inclusive models of place branding.

The action research methodology employed in this study contributes to improve practice and advance research through collective self-reflection and action (Herr & Anderson, 2005). By providing a quasi-real scenario to share knowledge and debate approaches, we empowered participants to collaboratively reflect (and self-reflect) on their practices and scope actions to support greater collaboration. We explore place branding in action and observe how the negotiation of meaning occurs through stakeholders' self-reflecting inquiry through the different stages of the intervention. Subject to replicating the case in alternative contexts/scenarios (Karlsen, 1991; Babbie, 2013, p. 94), our findings support the need for alternative arrangements to operationalize engagement and participation in more sustainable, democratic and ethical place branding models.

Notwithstanding the regional context of the study, the research emerges from a broader territorial concern and the applicability of its findings extend beyond specific administrative and political forms of territories. Further research could replicate the methodological approach in alternative territorial scenarios (Karlsen, 1991; Babbie, 2013, p. 94) thus providing further insights into the contextual prerequisites to the development of alternative governance arrangements to operationalize engagement and participation towards more sustainable, democratic and ethical place branding models. This would also further acknowledge SI as a key methodological tool to observe identity-formation processes for places and as a practical tool to facilitate stakeholder collaboration.

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